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AUTHOR	Medvin, Mandy B.; Mele, Renee M.
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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that children with disabilities are often rejected by their peers and are rarely selected as playmates. The purpose of this study was to investigate preschoolers' preferences for children with physical or developmental disabilities or typically developing children in hypothetical situations. Sixty-four preschool children from western Pennsylvania participated in this study. Children were asked to rank which puppets they preferred to play with in a classroom and a playground puppet scenario. Results indicated that children without disabilities were selected most frequently in both situations. Children with a physical disability were selected over those with developmental disabilities in the classroom, while children with developmental disabilities were preferred on the playground. These findings demonstrate that preschool children consider both context and peer abilities when choosing playmates. (Author)

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Preschoolers' Perceptions of Physical and Developmental Disabilities in Playmate Selection

Mandy B. Medvin, Westminster College, and
Renee M. Mele, Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic

Society for Research in Child Development 2003 Biennial Meeting
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Abstract

Research has shown that children with disabilities are often rejected by their peers and are rarely selected as playmates. The purpose of this study was to investigate preschoolers' preferences for children with physical or developmental disabilities or typically developing children in hypothetical situations. Sixty-four preschool children from Western Pennsylvania participated in this study. Children were asked to rank which puppets they preferred to play with in a classroom and playground puppet scenario. Results indicated that children without disabilities were selected most frequently in both situations. Children with a physical disability were selected over those with developmental disabilities in the classroom, while children with developmental disabilities were preferred on the playground. These findings demonstrate that preschool children consider both context and peer abilities when choosing playmates.

Introduction

Research has shown that children with disabilities are rejected by their peers and not as likely to be selected as playmates (Nabors & Keyes, 1995; Evans, 1984). Preschool children tend to choose peers who are more similar to them, but it is less clear how type of disability or situation influence acceptance. Some studies indicate that young children base their preferences on obvious physical or sensory disabilities, rather than cognitive or behavioral differences. Other studies indicate that children are aware of more subtle differences among their peers. Diamond and associates (2001) found that for physical disabilities young children are sensitive to both type of situation and limitations of children's abilities when choosing playmates.

The purpose of this study was to investigate preschoolers' perceptions of children with physical versus behavioral disabilities in two hypothetical play situations. Previous research (Mize & Ladd, 1988) has indicated that presenting children with hypothetical situations is an excellent way to examine children's acceptance of their peers. We predicted that (1) children without disabilities would be the most preferred playmates, (2) children with a physical disability would be selected second most in the classroom situation, but least in the playground situation where the physical disability might interfere with play, and (3) the child with a developmental disability would be selected second most in the playground situation but least in the classroom situation as their characteristics may make them an undesirable play partner.

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Methods

Design

A chi square was used to examine the effects of situation (classroom and playground) and disability (no disability, physical, or developmental) on a child's rank ordered preferences in playmate selection.

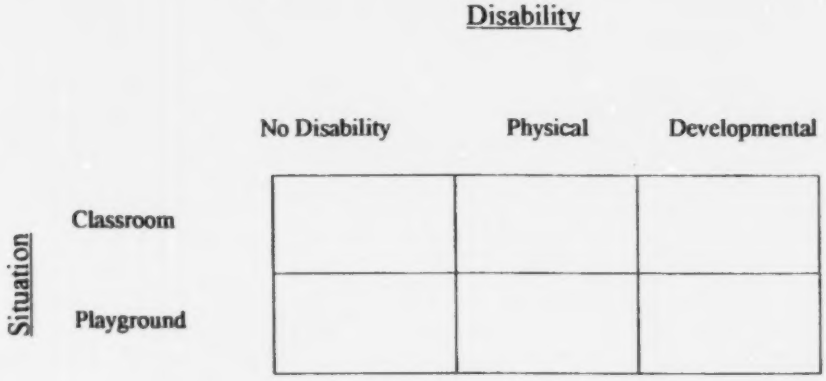

Figure 1. The effects of situation and disability on playmate selection.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 64 preschool children, 33 boys and 31 girls from 5 preschools from small communities in Western Pennsylvania. The ages of the children ranged from 2 to 5 years (33 to 67 months) old. Ninety-seven percent of the children were Caucasian, three percent were of different ethnic backgrounds.

Materials and Procedure

Children were presented with three distinctive puppets matched for gender and race, and scripts representing a typical peer, peer with a physical disability and peer with a developmental disability. A fourth puppet represented the participant being tested (see Table 2). The puppets acted out the scripts, and shapes were used as memory cues to help children remember the characteristics of each puppet (see Table 1). Children were tested for their memory of the scripts and their ability to identify each puppet appropriately. Children then rank ordered which peers they preferred to play with in a classroom and playground puppet scenario. The participant's choices and responses were audio recorded to ensure accuracy. After the selection of the puppets, as part of the debriefing, the participant listened to a book about typical children interacting with children with disabilities (Brown, 1982).

Children's spontaneous comments were categorized in regard to rank order (1, 2, or 3), disability status, and whether it was a liking or disliking comment. Liking comments included affection ('I like her'), reference to a common activity ('likes to play games'), a positive ability ('He can talk'), reference to the disability ('like foot thing'), or an idiosyncratic comment ('I like her dress'). Disliking comments referred to general dislike ('I don't want her to sit next to me'), or limited ability ('don't like the ones who can't walk').

Results

Results indicated that a child without disabilities was more likely to be the first choice in both situations, and that a child with developmental disabilities was least preferred (see Table 2). When examining the effect of situation, a child with a physical disability was more likely to be chosen second than one with a developmental disability in the classroom χ^2 (4,N = 64) = 126.11, $p \leq .01$, but a child with developmental disabilities was somewhat more likely to be the second choice in the playground situation χ^2 (4, N = 64) = 77.73, $p \leq .01$. No gender differences were found.

Children's comments were examined. The majority of comments were categorized under liking categories and involved affection or reference to the child's abilities, such as 'I like her', 'she can walk and talk', 'she talks to me when I color', 'she can play games better', 'no broken leg'. For the child with the physical disability, some considered that trait to be positive 'like hurt foot'. There were, however, a small number of disliking comments where children's choices were due to excluding others 'I don't want her to sit next to me', or a clear concern about a difference in ability 'don't like the ones who can't walk', 'the other one has a broken foot—she can't play'.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to determine if preschoolers' perceptions of disabilities affected their preferences in playmates. The results of this study provided support for the prediction that children without disabilities would be most preferred as playmates in both hypothetical situations. This finding is similar to previous studies indicating that young children prefer to play with non-disabled children (Diamond, LeFurgy, & Blass, 1991; Hall & McGregor, 2000; Sigelman, Miller, & Whitworth, 1986; Harper, Wacker, & Cobb, 1986). Young children are prone to interact with others who are similar to them (Cook & Semmel, 1999).

The results of this study also supported the prediction that children with physical disabilities would be more preferred in the classroom situation rather than in the playground situation. In addition, the prediction that the child with the developmental disability would be more preferred on the playground was also supported, though the preference was not as strong. Overall, the child with the developmental disability was the least preferred playmate. This research provides evidence for Erwin's (1993) view that children with developmental disabilities are perceived of as unattractive playmates. Interventions to improve attitudes toward children with disabilities are needed in the preschool years.

In conclusion, these findings indicate that preschool children are aware of the limitations of a child with non-visible disabilities, and under hypothetical situations choose their playmates accordingly. Secondly, similar to Diamond's (2001) findings, preschool children are capable of understanding how such limitations affect a child's ability as a playmate, thus making very fine-tuned discriminations. Therefore, models of children's understanding of social categories may be more complex than originally conceived.

Table 2

Percent Ranking of Each Disability in the Classroom and Playground Situations

	Percent at each rank		
Disability	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3
		n = 64	
		Classroom Situation	
No Disability	76.6% (49)	17.2% (11)	6.3% (4)
Physical Disability	18.8% (12)	60.9% (39)	20.3% (13)
Developmental Disability	4.7% (3)	21.9% (14)	73.4% (47)
		Playground Situation	
No Disability	73.4% (47)	23.4% (15)	3.1% (2)
Physical Disability	18.8% (12)	32.8% (21)	48.4% (31)
Developmental Disability	7.8% (5)	43.8% (28)	48.4% (31)

Note. Values enclosed in parentheses represent the number of participants that selected each disability at each rank.

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Table 2

Interview Scripts for Stimulus Puppets

Child Without a Disability:

This is Suzie/Simon Square. She/He is special. She/He can walk. She/He can talk like other kids. She/He likes to go to school. School is easy for her. Suzie/Simon knows how to play a lot of games. She/He likes to play with other kids. She/He acts like most kids her age.

Child With a Physical Disability:

This is Sally/Steven Circle. She/He is special. She/He cannot walk like other kids. She/He wears a special brace on her leg to help her walk. Sally/Steven can talk like other kids. She/He likes to go to school. School is easy for her. Sally/Steven knows how to play a lot of games. She/He likes to play with other kids. She/He acts like most kids her age.

Child With a Developmental Disability

This is Tammy/Teddy Triangle. She/He is special. She/He can walk. She/He can't talk like other kids. She/He likes school even though it is hard for her. She/He doesn't know how to play many games with others. She/He likes to play by herself. She/He doesn't act like most kids her age.

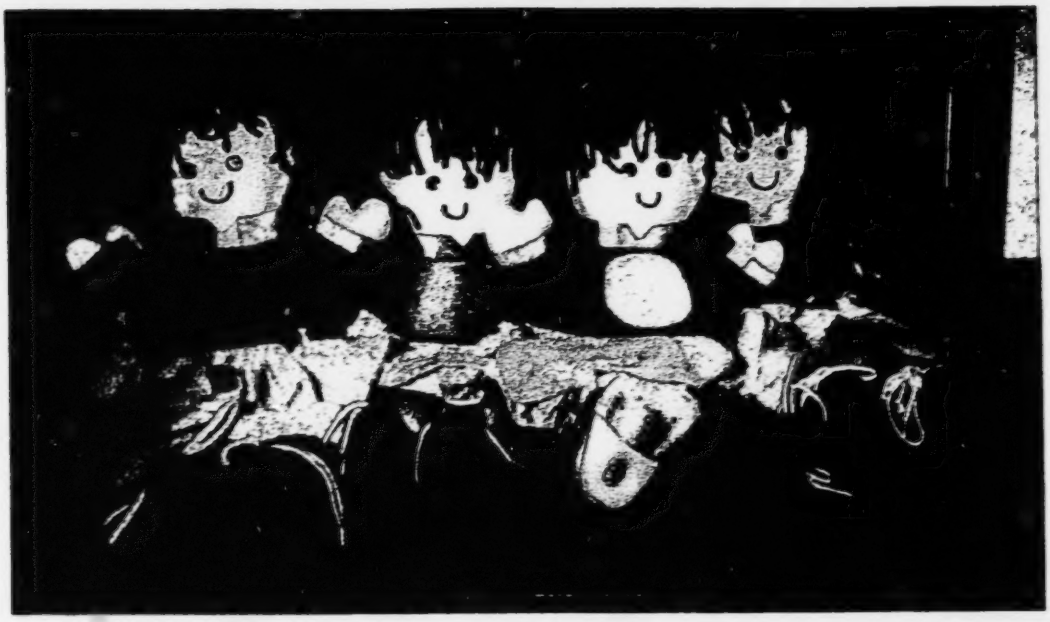

Figure 2. Picture of the puppets used in the study.

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